a prayer for which no words exist

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a prayer for which no words exist

by london_cowboy

Summary

All the times Gale Cleven chokes, and the one time that he doesn't.

Please do not walk into this expecting more than just a bit of a character study. Some repression, some pining, a pinch of trauma, and a little bit of smut to finish things off (lol). But mostly just an idiot in love.

Notes

These boys are holding my heart hostage and this is how I process my feelings, alright?

Be mindful there is a brief mention of self-harm (not particularly graphic but still) and some war times related bits that may be heavier on some readers!

Also, a loving reminder that this is a work of fiction inspired solely by the characters from the series and it is in no way meant to represent the real-life individuals.

See the end of the work for more notes

“You're in a car with a beautiful boy, and you're trying not to tell him that you love him, and you're trying to choke down the feeling, and you're trembling, but he reaches over and he touches you, like a prayer for which no words exist, and you feel your heart taking root in your body, like you've discovered something you don't even have a name for.”

Richard Siken, *Crush*

I

Gale Cleven chokes, a silvery-grey wisp of smoke tickling his throat, already irritated after a few gulps of whiskey he bravely swallowed down about a minute earlier. He is seventeen and really should know better, but somehow *this* is still how he finds himself: body suddenly folding in half as if outside of his will, lungs painful and tight, embarrassment colouring his cheeks bright, childish red.

He's gasping for breath.

Someone’s laughing – not at him, rather at the situation, an unspoken *“You’ve been warned”* hanging low in the swelter of a late-July dusk. There’s not an ounce of cruelty to the chuckle, as innocent and young as they all are this summer, although some pretend not to be, stealing smokes from their old men and sneaking out to get in (usually disappointingly moderate) trouble. This is how they spend most of their evenings these days: wandering around or lounged in a slightly deformed circle at the edge of the park, legs stretched out, knees knobby and scratched climbing fences.

Gale knows that he’s safe here, feeling more *home* than he does in his parents’ actual house. The boys he hangs out with aren’t really what you’d call “a wrong crowd”, although his mother still frowns when he announces that is where he’s going (again), barely having finished the last bite of his beef steak chislic (he cannot look at it anymore, therefore often catches himself eating mindlessly, and with half-lidded eyes). They all share a similar background, and they all look somewhat the same this summer – dusty, gangly and tanned. They’re

not bad guys, just always a little bit hungry, always a little bit bored. Gale does have these traits, he does, and yet he still sticks out, carrying himself a tiny bit straighter, stiffer than the rest. He's always the one to remind them that actions, however benign, *do* have consequences.

It wasn't all smooth sailing at the start but, by now, they are used to how circumspect he tends to be, how risk-averse. He's no coward, everybody knows that. Just *responsible*. Years of fathering the man who should have fathered him taught Gale to be careful, alert, and to always to his best to avoid unnecessary losses.

He's not *Buck* yet, won't be for the next couple of years – just *Gale*, a name with a nice melody to it, especially if pronounced by a girl who speaks with a nice, soft lilt (like Marge), but no *meaning* – although he already has almost all the characteristics that will define him in the future, unbelievably stark when put in the right contrast. He will be strong where Bucky is weak, and vulnerable where Bucky's keeping his composure. Forbearing with Bucky completely losing self-control and embarrassingly impatient when Bucky'll impress him with his unexpected moderation.
He will remain sane when Bucky seemingly loses his mind. And absolutely deranged later, giving John a chance to take care of him (*the chance?* - John will take it).

For now, though, he's like a jigsaw puzzle with half of its' pieces missing. Seventeen years old, choking on a *fag* (oh, if he'd only known), living in a world with no John Clarence Egan in it, although sometimes, without knowing, he can already sense him in his bones.

II

Gale Cleven chokes on his own laughter, eyes prickling with tears. It *is* inappropriate; he risks earning a stern rebuke, and yet he really cannot stop, even when biting the insides of his cheek, hard, and digging his nails into the soft flesh of his palms, tiny reddish crescents blossoming under the unforgiving pressure.

The space is small but bright, and smells of chalk and old wood. They never really call it "a classroom" although it is exactly what it is, just as the place they're at, and will be spending the next few months at, non-stop, is a school. Not a college, where you're supposed to seek

experiences and opportunities to make mistakes you'll never want to repeat again. Not a university, where the most promising individuals are polished to shine even brighter, while still fitting into the system.

They are here to learn how to *fly*.

However, what Gale's been mostly learning since he arrived, is how to *handle* John Egan. Bucky. Yes, you've guessed it: the very stone in Gale's shoe.

John – tall, loud, fair but blunt, often reckless, sometimes completely unhinged - is both: everything that Gale admires, and everything he's usually trying to stay away from. If Gale were a girl (which he, obviously, isn't, and hates himself for even going in this direction in his fantas –

in his *thoughts*), if Gale were a girl, he'd think John is *trouble*, but this is not a very manly thing to say, is it? And he does happen to be a man, however young (on some days that means: *full of enthusiasm*; on others: *scared shitless*), his masculinity like a weird animal he doesn't yet know how to tame.

John makes these jokes sometimes – like the one about saluting with one's left hand, or whatever, that just caused Gale to snort mid-lecture, his body going all taut in an effort to supress laughter bubbling inside, somewhere deep, vulnerable and adolescent – and they catch Buck off-guard despite, theoretically, him always seeing the next one coming.

Hoping for the next one to come.

He isn't even sure how exactly did it happen that they've become what they are, *friends,* he supposes, *Bucky and Buck*. He wasn't asked - he was *claimed*, marked, stamped like a library book before being borrowed.
(Bucky keeps borrowing novels to never give them back; he hoards them in their room, all blatantly unfinished, a promise of a good time left to hang mid-chapter).

He wasn't –

He perhaps still *isn't* sure if it was the best idea: to let Egan in, but he

now realises that there's no coming back from Bucky, who is like a gash to his soul, a deep, raw scar dividing Gale's entire life into *a before* and *an after*.

Moreover:

He now realises that if there is any way in which he may survive this –
Whatever they are about to face, really -
It won't be without John. It will be with him, or not at all.

And he can't even make himself feel mad about it.

III

Gale Cleven chokes down a sob.

It is late, although he's not sure of the exact time, just as he isn't sure how long had he been here for. He's made his way to the barracks some time ago already, the sky above him heavy and dark, stars like pinpricks, something *in him* restless, building up like a howl he won't be able to stop once he starts letting it out.

It happens more and more often; it happens after almost every mission: he seems to be losing the track of time, struggles to identify his own position in the space, fingers tingling, his vision blooming wildly with pulsating white dots.

He is, *Goddammit*, like a plane with no navigator. The only things that eventually bring him back from that state again are pain and fear.

Or pleasure, which is currently never separate from either, if not both.

It's usually the same scenario: when Gale notices that he begins to spiral, he excuses himself. He's always scared that he won't be able to do it in time and then God only knows what will happen, but so far, he's always managed to make it out in time.

He seeks refuge in places in which he is likely to be alone. He rarely goes to his fort, it feels like a profanity, but the storage spaces are good, or the showers, of course.

This is, he'd figured, one of the first things that any boarding school and any scouts camp teaches you when you're a boy: to cry in the

shower, far from people's suspicion and their icy, judgemental gaze, safe from insults creeping in, licking your neck and building a hornet-like nest in your mind. Any irritation, any soft, bright pinkness under the line of your lashes you can explain with *soap*. You're not scared, you're not missing home, you're not in love with your best friend, it's just suds getting into your eyes, what's a big deal?

For some reason, being naked makes it easier for Gale to ground himself. It's easier to breathe without all these layers, buttons, buckles, stitches, hems; easier to dig his nails into a soft patch of pale skin on the hip or above the elbow. Hurt is like an anchor. It calms him down; tears not much more than an unwanted but unavoidable side effect. He needs no more than a few minutes, most of the time, for his heart to stop running races, for his shallow breathing to steady.

That was the plan for today, but Gale is mid-cry when someone walks in.

It is one of the new guys, a lanky, copper-headed thing fresh out of the flying school and with only eleven more days to live, although neither of them can know if, of course. The only thing they *know* is that the boy has heard him, the sound both thick and garbled, whiny and obvious despite the convenient thrum of water.

Gale freezes, goosebumps dotting his neck even under the shower's heat, chest heaving. He starts turning, but then he slows down and *thinks*. His hand sits low already – he's been scratching a long, red line into the side of his leg – and it's easy to raise it just a couple of inches, turn it suggestively. It's even easier to turn a whimper into a grunt, not a high-pitched, sad sound anymore, but something guttural, much lower.

They're fighting a war. It's better for the kid to see his *Major* succumbing to lust and frustration than to misery and longing. In other words: if the ginger needs to think something of Gale (and Gale knows that he will), it's better for him to be convinced he'd just caught Major Cleven jacking off than crying like a child, desperate to find control over his own pain.

Either way, the boy won't tell anyone. He'll take whatever knowledge he's just gained to his grave.

IV

Gale Cleven chokes before he even manages to slide the spoon between his chapped lips, the smell tickling his nostrils, sour-sweet and foul. It's like the odour of burnt skin, just sweeter, less sharp, more *mellow*, if you may. It's both fascinating and repulsing to realize this is how his mind automatically categorizes scents these days, comparing them with everything Gale experienced in action, all the horrors he's been through still clawing at his mind. Back in the day, before it all started, he'd turn to poetry, compare things to flowers, the sky, silly things like that.
"Your eyes are like two wild lakes on a calm, summer day", he wrote once in a letter to Marge, drafted right before he was first shipped out. He now realises that he had never sent it, and not plainly because its' quality was embarrassingly poor. Maybe he should have. It would then have existed – a physical proof of *Gale Before the War*, a man who looked his age, who had dreams, not just nightmares.
Not a wreck of a human being with only cadavers, collapsed buildings and burnt flesh where his innocent metaphors used to live.

How else, though?

He looks down.
It's a fucking cat-soup. A *cat-soup.*

He tries to wonder if he would ever be able to explain it to Marge but, deep down, he knows that he won't even try. When –

If he comes home, he will keep these recollections to himself, bury them under layers and layers of lies, his charming smile, the boyish glint of his eyes, still bright as if he wasn't changed, transformed, as if their shine isn't just a type of varnish one can coat broken things with to pretend that they're still *well.*
If he's lucky, he thinks as he swallows the first spoon, quickly biting into a thin slice of the stale, sour bread from their scant rations, maybe one day he'll be able to talk about it with someone who will know what it's like. Someone who will understand, maybe Brady, or Alex.

Or John.

If -

When, he thinks. When they both come home.

V

Gale Cleven chokes, mouth full of the hard heat of Bucky's cock. He's kneeling, knees pressing into the bare wooden floor in the narrow corridor of their shared flat, one hand struggling for purchase, sliding down John's thigh and shin, the other chasing the movements of his mouth, the wet, obscene *up and down.*

To their neighbours, they are two bachelors who bonded, platonically but perhaps just a little bit too tightly, during the war. Nothing more, although he sometimes senses the looks that they receive, the little, weird, questionless stares. They are heroes now, therefore no one has the right to question them anyway, although everybody knows they are both a little damaged: John with his periodical drinking, one-, two-week long episodes of getting *shitfaced* every evening, and doing so nearly to the point of blacking out, and Gale who sometimes screams at night, a lanky German kid pointing a bayonet at him until Gale realises that he is not a kid, he's a shadow, a coat stand, a tree branch pressed against their window by a particularly violent summer storm.

And that is perhaps precisely why no one asks them anymore if they have sweethearts, plans to marry, a need for something more than a shared flat and a scrawny, deaf dog (also a veteran, the only survivor of a bombing that killed his owners, two adults and two little girls; he spends a lot of time with John's sister and her kids, where he is now; otherwise they would have to at least make it to the bedroom – the poor animal could have been deaf, but he wasn't blind).

"Buck", John breathes out, voice hoarse, pupils blown so wide they almost swallow the entirety of his irises, "So eager. Fuck - " He fists Gale's hair, the pomade long forgotten, lost to the evening spent in a bar, cigarette smoke weaved in between the blonde curls. John's slacks pool around his ankles, the buckle of his belt clanging when he shuffles his feet, his shorts suspended mid-thigh. They were in such a rush. They always seem to be in such a rush (Gale knows this is the case for him, and suspects it may be the case for Bucky, too: he still cannot believe they have time). "So *hungry*".

It reverberates in Buck's mind as he takes Bucky deeper, so deep he gags, the familiar discomfort erasing thoughts from his mind as the

only thing that's left is lust in its' purest form. There's a damp spot on the fabric of his trousers and he realises that he is leaking in more than one way, wet with precome and saliva dripping from his mouth, a solitary tear rolling down to rest in the dip above his Cupid's bow, covered in sweat gathered on his neck and back, and trickling down until it tickles the two little divots above his arse.

So *hungry*, he thinks – the realisation just an echo of John's words. It is filthy, and vulgar, and so, so adequate.

Yes, John is right (he usually is, although Gale obviously won't admit to that, too used to their everlasting bickering to give up mid-clash when they quarrel over this or that, their fighting actually just a sparring, an excuse to have to make up in bed). Gale is hungry. He is starving, in fact. He feels *ravenous* for life.

These last few weeks before their return to the States, and many more after they've finally left Europe, Gale really doubted he'd ever feel that way again. He wasn't sure if his memory of what is it like – to *want to live* – is even accurate. It was a phantom pain of a feeling: he missed his will to live like one may miss a limb lost in action. He knew it was there, once, he felt an excruciating ache where it should be, but did not see it anymore, no matter how hard he would look.

That was before his final split from Marge, the necessary conversation that brought him less grief and more relief than he anticipated. And before he shouldered his duffle bag, one of unwanted, however practical souvenirs from the war, and bought a round-trip ticket to Manitowoc, Wisconsin.

It's needless to say that he never used the return one.

"Yeah", he manages between one ragged breath and another, or perhaps between two long, lewd licks that make John tremble all over and rip a sound out of his mouth, a beautiful, dirty note that seems to set Gale on fire "Yeah, I'm – *fuck*".

John fails to stay still, too far gone – although he'd stop immediately if Gale were to tap his thigh or frown with anything different than pleasure – and pushes in again, wincing slightly at the hint of Gale's teeth, laughing (another wonderful, bright sound), and Gale chokes again, simultaneously full and wonderfully empty, free of hurt and overflowing with l -

I

Gale Cleven probably *should* choke on the finality of the statement he's just about to make, but he doesn't, the feeling surgically clean, the thought pristine in his mind, the words heavy but lovely on his tongue. He's never voiced it before, not out loud, although they both knew for a long time, and although he's aware John feels the same. The latter, because John had told him (of course he did, *years* ago, his lips loose, his heart on his sleeve). The former: because John could always read his mind.

It's not a matter of readiness, nor of courage. Buck's no coward, they both know it all too well.
It is what it always is about for Gale: *the after* and *the aftermath*, the never-ending, responsible consideration of the consequences of each and every step he's about to make.

(There only time he really risked it, starting to run and jumping that fucking wall, was the worst mistake he'd ever made. They sometimes argue about it with John, and while Gale agrees with him that yes, all ended *well*, he would still turn back the time if given a choice, he'd never leave Bucky's side that night).

He's not concerned about John. He's concerned about *himself*. He wonders if, when he says it, he will ever be able to stop.

It could have happened on so many other instances (last night, when they fucked on the living room floor, a delirious, sweaty tangle of limbs and moans and laughs; last Christmas – the first one in their new house, when it was just the two of them, kissing silly under a wispy mistletoe hanging from the ceiling next to a bare lightbulb; last decade, during the war, when he really thought it impossible for both of them to make it), but this is how it goes:

it is early morning and early spring and they are in bed, stretched on a brand-new mattress, one that is better for Bucky's back while being large enough to be comfortably shared between the two of them. There's a thin sun ray sneaking into the bedroom through the green curtains they picked together, tickling the tip of Bucky's nose. John mumbles something about coffee, his voice still laced with sleep. Their feet touch; John wiggles his toes; he's wearing just one sock. Gale's heart is so swollen with affection that he thinks it may burst, and if it

does – and then he *dies* – he cannot imagine himself dying saying anything else.

He props himself up on his elbow.

“I love you, John”, he says.

Christ, he was right. His utterances keep coming, sliding off his tongue, pushing his teeth apart. He wants to whisper, but he also wants to shout. It’s a prayer, a promise, a plea. A fact. It is, he realises, the only truth he knows and, equally, the only truth he needs to know for the rest of his life. Three words with a name added to them in the centre of his entire universe. He repeats it a little bit louder, “I love you, John”.

His heart should be wild in his chest, he thinks, surprised, but instead it is steady and calm, does not skip a single beat, as sure of its’ own rhythm as it could possibly be. He swallows.

“I love you. John? I love you. I – “

John turns to look at him, face calm and open, arms broad and tanned, the first, innocent gleam of silver on his temples (you really have to know where to look to find it, and Gale, obviously, knows). When he smiles, Gale smiles, and when he moves, Gale moves, and then somebody kisses someone, but Gale won’t remember who was the one to initiate. Should it even matter? Because what truly matters, is that although John can read his mind, it goes both ways, so he knows exactly what comes next when Bucky gently pulls away, and says:

“I know”, he’s beaming, and failing terribly at pretending not to beam, “But, *Buck*, what took you so long?”

End Notes

The first fic was supposed to be the last one, too, and look where it got me. I am considering writing something with an actual plot but idk, let's see. Do let me know though if you'd like to read more!!!

And, generally, I will madly appreciate all the love (tough love will do if need be!!!) and feedback and anything you've got to give.
I am also now on tumblr because I need to act out somewhere, come find me: @luckydeuce and let's be friends

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!